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AUTHOR Airaudi, Jesse T.
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ABSTRACT

Student writers should be encouraged to move beyond a "jargon" or "public discourse" model of writing. This can be accomplished by capitalizing on the students' knack for imitation by turning it into public parody. After being divided into small panels of three, four, or five members, students are assigned a voice and topic and asked to develop a parody. Suggested voices and topics include (1) a bureaucrat announcing an energy conservation plan in the home, (2) a politician admitting to being caught red-handed at some shady deal, (3) a weather announcer with tomorrow's weather, (4) a spokesperson for a company explaining to the public why prices must go up, or (5) a commercial sales person selling a new "wonder" product. One class period is enough, most students can construct the parodies from these topics "cold." Each group is encouraged to develop its parody solely for the entertainment and approval of the other members of the class. This parody technique carries over to each students' serious writing--by laughing themselves out of their affectation, the way is cleared for the students' own voices to emerge. (HOD)

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Jesse T. Airaudi
English Department
Baylor University
Waco, Texas 76703

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The Reluctant Thinker and the Uses of Voice Parody in the Classroom

We ought to be thankful and delighted whenever a reluctant thinker puts anything even halfway coherent on paper, but, of course, it must seem to him that we will never be satisfied until he can write, as somebody's student once said, "like Faulkner." And so the reluctant thinker is dismayed when we comment that a certain kind of seemingly coherent writing is ineffective, often annoying, and perhaps even immoral.

No doubt what we call "jargon," what some now call "public discourse," can serve as a provisional model for the inexperienced writer, as some of our colleagues propose,[1] but I speak here of a considerable number of student writers, reluctant thinkers, who should be taught to move beyond that model. One group of these writers is content to use public discourse as the best model for educated writers and speakers; another group has found the use of public discourse and the "writer/reader role" it implies increasingly frustrating because it stereotypes the written "voice" and is an inefficient instrument of thought.

The first group is the least dismayed by our comments and exhortations, and is, therefore, the most difficult to move onward. They are content to write (and will defend as their own language) statements about "life styles" which are "enhanced" by a "variety of activities involving achieving self-realization." Their complacency is partly their fault, partly ours, and partly everybody else's out there beyond our classroom walls. Most of the students in this group may never ask of the language the precision and excellence we know it can give. And we, as their models of usage, just

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are not that "credible." Consider how many students have complained to you that our criteria for evaluating their writing is "subjective," that there are as many models of writing as there are English teachers. This first group imitates users of the language who are more "real" to them than we: the off- and on-campus users of public discourse. So we ought not to be surprised when we see them write and defend statements which are vague in their categories, imprecise in their predication, profligate and redundant at best and boring, evasive or dishonest at worst. Remember who their real models are, and know that the semi-professional weathermen who, in the interests of time and glibness, parley the likelihood of snow into "an extremely high probability of snowfall precipitation activity," are more consistent and authoritative in these matters than we "subjective" users. I am not surprised to hear this group defend the fashionable and loose pseudo-verb "involve" (or "exhibits" or "enhances" or "stems from" or "entails," etc.) as educated and even elegant: one of "Charlie's Angels" tells them in The Family Weekly that she now wants "to get involved with a project involving young kids--and animals."[2] Students of the first group would retort that we know what she meant: for these student writers, the burden of ferreting out meaning lies not with the writer, but with the reader. This group prefers elegant obscurity to being plain; simplicity it confuses with baldness and equates with ignorance. But their moral complacency about the use of their model is more disturbing, and I will not rehash George Orwell's argument, but remind you of this group's "real language" models who use language to hide the steak and sell the sizzle. It seems as though we don't stand a chance in the language model game against the ad men, the news anchormen who carry objectivity to pretentiousness, the weathermen (and the sportscasters, who follow and exceed them in puffing up their

scanty materials), celebrities outside their fields, and local and national politicians who as often as not use language formulae to wear down our inquisitiveness. Moreover, if we academics look at ourselves as models, we may find that we, too, implicitly approve public discourse as educated usage. Thousands of examples of such thoughtless writing are pinned to bulletin boards and pass through campus mail each semester. Moreover, models of this discourse abound in the lectures and textbooks of our students' other, "real" courses. And haven't we composition and literature teachers unwittingly served as models of this sort with our own assignment sheets when, rushed as usual for time and thought, we carelessly tossed off something about "elements," "aspects," or "concepts," or, lacking time to polish, been led on a merry chase after the elusive thought (or bolted out of the corner we've written ourselves into) with an ill-considered "in terms of" phrase? Even the best among us make mistakes; even the high-priest of anti-jargon admits his failing in "Politics and the English Language": "Look back through this essay," he writes, "and for certain you will find that I have again and again committed the very faults I am protesting against."[3]

Most of us, however, care enough to look back through our writing, but the first group of student writers is complacent about their borrowed voice. Our comments about "jargon," or "wordiness" and triteness or the lack of economy, subordination and emphasis, might ruffle a conscience or two before the next assignment, but little changes over the course of the semester, even if we take the time and pain to demonstrate the model's shortcomings. Our pleas to prefer actor or concrete subjects to abstract subjects; to prefer active verbs to static noun phrases; to subordinate for economy and emphasis; to cut flab to the bone and flesh out with muscular, perceptive

detail, are ignored. Our pleas seem irrelevant to writing about what the first group calls "the real world."

Although the second group profits from our nudgings (or from Orwell, Wayne Booth, or any other critic of jargon likely to be found in their readings), such nudgings are unnecessary. This second group has already seen the model attacked and ridiculed by more credible--because more "popular"--critics: Mobil Corporation's Sunday-paper column Observations and newsman Edwin Newman, for example. A few of them have seen the model subtly ridiculed in the New Yorker Magazine, and almost all have seen the unmerciful young satirists of PBS's Second City Television and NBC's Saturday Night Live snicker and tear at it. The members of the second group are not complacent; they are in pain. They suffer the same fate as the virtuous heathens in the Inferno who know there is something better but despair of ever having it. We must sympathize with them; we ask much when we ask them to abandon the model imposed upon them which may well help them to survive college and the world beyond our towers. We have a moral decision to make and we must once again examine our reasons for teaching and the basic tenets of the humanities. Those of us who guide not only our students' social adjustment, but personal growth as well must provide them with choices, even though we make ourselves vulnerable to critics on and off campus. With this warning, let me proceed with the reasons for and the plan of the serious game of voice parody in the classroom.

It once seemed enough to treat the symptoms of this borrowed "style" with doses of marginal comments: "jargon," "overworked," "wordy," and even, in an occasional fit of annoyance at the spectacle of a good mind in the grip of some charlatan's language, "Aw, come on!" Nor did the long lists of

"Thou Shalt Nots," a la Orwell seem to do much good. As an undergraduate, I probably would have ignored the "Don't" lists, too, had I gotten them. But my writing instructor, chuckling and shaking his sage head, simply read the more pretentious papers aloud. After these sessions we tried to write less like pedants and more like ourselves, but we hurt. Later, I found myself in his place, and I knew that "do not" lists won't work, and that laughing at their mistakes won't do. These days I capitalize on my students' knack for imitation, and turn it into public parody. In a class exercise, I tell them to "do" rather than "don't," and as they do they enjoy themselves and laugh. If ever by habit or design they privately imitate the model again, the humor of the public parody exercise carries over as a corrective.

To assure a mixture of students from all groups--the habitual and the compulsive users of public discourse as well as the liberal arts group and the inexperienced writers--I randomly divide the class into small "panels" of three, four, or five. I assign each panel a voice and topic as the class begins. Hyperbole is the essence of parody; I ask them to "lay it on with a trowel" (sometimes the students find they cannot exceed the model they are parodying, which is a lesson in itself). The following voices and topics have worked well, and the instructor may arrange and connect them for continuity:

> A bureaucrat (or someone in the Office of the Dean of Student Housing, etc.) announcing an energy conservation plan in the home (or dorm).
>
> A politician "admitting" he has been caught red-handed at some shady deal or other.

The weatherman with tomorrow's weather.

A sportscaster with a dearth of sports news.

A spokesman for a company explaining to the public why (coffee, gasoline, rent, book) prices must go up.

A "child-guidance expert" summarizing his findings on the benefits of strong family ties.

A commercial pitchman selling a new "wonder" product (shampoo, toothpaste, mouthwash, aspirin-substitute, vitamin product, the latest model automobile, an exercise or food-processing gadget).

One class period is enough: most students can construct the parodies from these familiar topics "cold." Making a "production" of the exercise ruins the spontaneity necessary to get the corrective laughter, as does competition: each group should feel free to develop its parody solely for the entertainment and approval of the other members of the class. Everybody gets into the spirit, so there's no problem getting a member of each group to read the parody, and another to read a straightforward "translation." All this sounds too like a party to be instructive, but let me assure you that the parody technique carries over to each student's serious writing. The laughter of his classmates, and above all his own laughter, will echo in his ears whenever he is tempted to use the public discourse model for an inappropriate audience or subject.

At the beginning of the next class meeting, when things are quieter, I briefly reinforce what the parodies have revealed about public discourse's

general ineffectiveness, potential for evasion and dishonesty, and great conforming power and, I repeat some pertinent examples from the parodies which the class found amusing and instructive. But I always end the section on "voice" with reminders of the importance of what each group has accomplished. Both groups of student writers laugh themselves out of their affectation and clear the way for their own voices to emerge, but neither benefits more from the voice parody exercise than that minority group of "liberal arts" students who feel surrounded, if not overwhelmed, by the others. The parody exercise supports their identity and autonomy. And for the inexperienced writers in the class, those reluctant thinkers who have no model at all, the dismantling of the cumbersome abstraction-laden model in favor of a concrete, responsible one provides the foundation they can most solidly build upon. The entire class perceives that their implied audience has wider interests, capacities, and needs than public discourse could hope to address. Each student learns that I sympathize and support him when I assure the class that the student's right to his own language means more than flavoring writing and speech with dialects and ephemeral slang, that it means the right to choose the word, phrase, and sentence combinations that reflect an honest perception of the world, courtesy and sympathy for a varied and human audience, and a true and courageous verbal image of himself.

If we choose the creative use of language over the merely imitative and expeditious, perhaps, after all, we will not be satisfied until our students write "like Faulkner."

Notes

[1]Cleo McNelly, "On Not Teaching Orwell," College English, 38 (1977), 555-556, for example.

[2]Jaclyn Smith in "Ask Them Yourself," Family Weekly, supplement to The Waco Tribune-Herald, April 17, 1977, p. 2.

[3]George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in his The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), p. 137.